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BACK BAY 1976-77
Back Bay Association
Back Bay Federation for Community Development



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Back Bay Federation for Community Development

BACK BAY / MOVING TOWARD THE 1980s

Year after year Back Bay remakes itself, preparing to meet the challenges of the future.

The last twelve months saw extensive changes. The tall reflective Hancock Tower opened in October. It is now the major symbol of Back Bay's economic resurgence.

The first rail transit improvement in decades became visible. Other transportation advances are on the drawing board right now.

Lighting up the Back Bay is a continuous process. New street lights have been installed on Marlborough Street and Commonwealth Avenue, with more now being erected on Newbury Street.

The dramatic reconversion of school buildings to quality housing has continued at an accelerated pace. This is one of the most impressive trends in the area today.

In the most dramatic act of 1976, the Saunders family rescued the former Statler Hilton hotel and reopened it as The Boston Park Plaza. Meanwhile, the long-stalled Park Plaza Urban Renewal Project has begun to inch ahead.

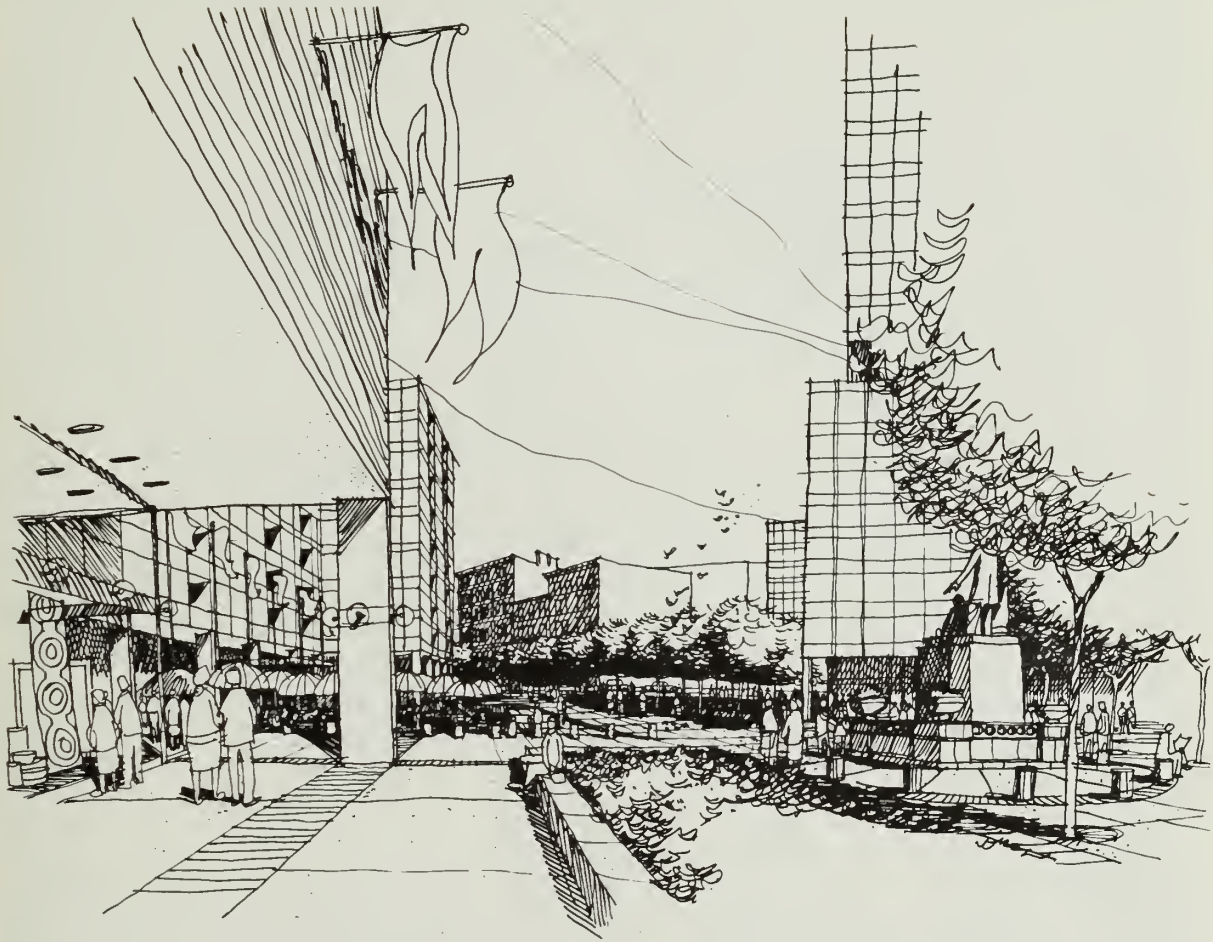
An exciting new development proposal has been offered for Copley Square. The developers, architects, and state officials are at work on the plans. The Federation, BBA, and the Neighborhood Association are monitoring this proposal, which should come to a decision point in the Fall.

Note: This report covers the twelve months preceding May 1, 1977.

BACK BAY



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Back Bay
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I

MAJOR DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

The Back Bay, south of Boylston Street, is a great development corridor. Three major projects, the Christian Science Center, Prudential, and the Hancock Complex, have already been constructed there. Two other possibilities are the Park Plaza Urban Renewal Project and the new proposal for Copley Square development.

Christian Science Center

The imposing Christian Science Center was completed in May 1975, but development activities continue along the periphery.

Recently, twin towers went into construction on Huntington Avenue at Massachusetts Avenue, opposite Symphony Hall. These towers will provide 404 units of much needed low rental housing for the elderly. They should be ready for occupancy at the end of 1978.

A block away, beside the Colonnade Hotel, the Church has a site for development. The plan here calls for 312 units of middle income apartments. Interest in this site is mounting and a decision to go forward may be forthcoming soon.

John Hancock

The city's tallest building, the John Hancock Tower, opened in October 1976. The John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company is, of course, the principal tenant. Other occupants that have moved into the building to date include:

Marsh & McLennan, Inc.
Ernst & Ernst
Betterley Consulting Group
National Medical Care, Inc.
The First National Bank of Boston
First National Bank of Chicago
United Air Lines
American Idea Marketing, Inc.
Skyview of Boston, Inc.
Eastern Newsstand Corp. of Boston

The Hancock Tower has been selected by the American Institute of Architects to receive one of the eleven 1977 honor awards for new buildings in this country. This is the highest award given for design excellence. (More about Hancock on Page 19.)



Park Plaza

Now in its seventh year of planning and debate, this huge project inches forward. The general plan for Park Plaza Phase I is shown on opposite page.

The State Transportation Office Building (A) is well along in planning. Land taking for this structure should begin in the Fall of 1977, followed by demolition, with a construction start scheduled for April 1979.

This will be an unusual building for the State. Ground floor and mezzanine should have shops and restaurants to support the theater district and light up the area at night. Spaces for the performing arts may also be built into this structure.

Planning is now under way for the relocation of Charles Street.

Private investment in the project is less certain. Assuming City Council approval in mid 1977, BRA hopes that the first bona fide private commitments will be made. The first private building expected to go into construction is the hotel (C) which the Authority expects will be under way in mid 1978.

The Page 3 sketch shows the hotel (C) on the left, with the apartment tower (B) on the right. In the background are existing buildings on Park Square at Boylston Street.

Copley Square Development Proposal

Great Bay Company of Cambridge, headed by K. Dun Gifford, and the Urban Investment and Development Corporation of Chicago have proposed a major development over the Copley Square air rights. The site is shown on the map on Pages 10 and 11.

Urban Investment, which has widespread development experience in the midwest, is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Aetna Insurance Company of Hartford. The architect for this project is Ben Thompson, a professional of international stature, best known locally for the redesign of Quincy Market.

The concept plan suggests a large convention hotel with housing and selected retailing, along with parking and other services. Western International, one of the nation's leading hotel chains, has expressed a firm interest in this site. The total investment could reach \$200 million.

A six-month study process of the feasibility of this proposal and the environmental impact is now under way by the developer and state agencies. BBA, the Federation, and the Neighborhood Association are members of a special advisory committee monitoring this project.



II

TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

Green Line

The first rail transit improvements in years became visible in the Back Bay at the end of 1976. At that time the first of the modern Light Rail Vehicles (LRV) came into service. Eventually, 175 of these sleek green vehicles will be running through the Back Bay. By May 1977 approximately thirty were in operation with others under testing and the balance to be delivered.

The product of "space age technology", this new design transit car has been going through a painful shakedown. Cars have been put in and out of service as difficulties have been encountered. A few derailments, many electrical and mechanical failures have been experienced. Repair and maintenance are significant headaches.

By late 1977 most of these problems should be solved and the new vehicles should be in substantial service, with the full fleet of new cars to be operational by early 1979.

As the new vehicles come on line, Back Bay shoppers, workers, and residents are getting their first taste of smooth, comfortable air conditioned transit.

Orange Line

A much more significant transit improvement is planned for the Back Bay, to be completed in 1985, or thereabouts. The MBTA Orange Line will be rerouted through the Back Bay, with a principal station at Copley Square. This will be in a new building to be constructed on the site of the Back Bay Railroad Station, which will be demolished as part of the program.

Commuter railways running from the southwest into Back Bay will be significantly upgraded by 1985, and patronage should expand.

Intercity travel from Boston to Washington will be improved, speeded up, and probably electrified by early 1980s. Unfortunately, the Federal Rail Administration wishes to close the Back Bay Station to intercity travel, terminating trains only at South Station. BBA believes this will be a mistake, given the fact that fifty percent of the passengers on Amtrak services originate at the Back Bay Station. We believe that the Station will be maintained.

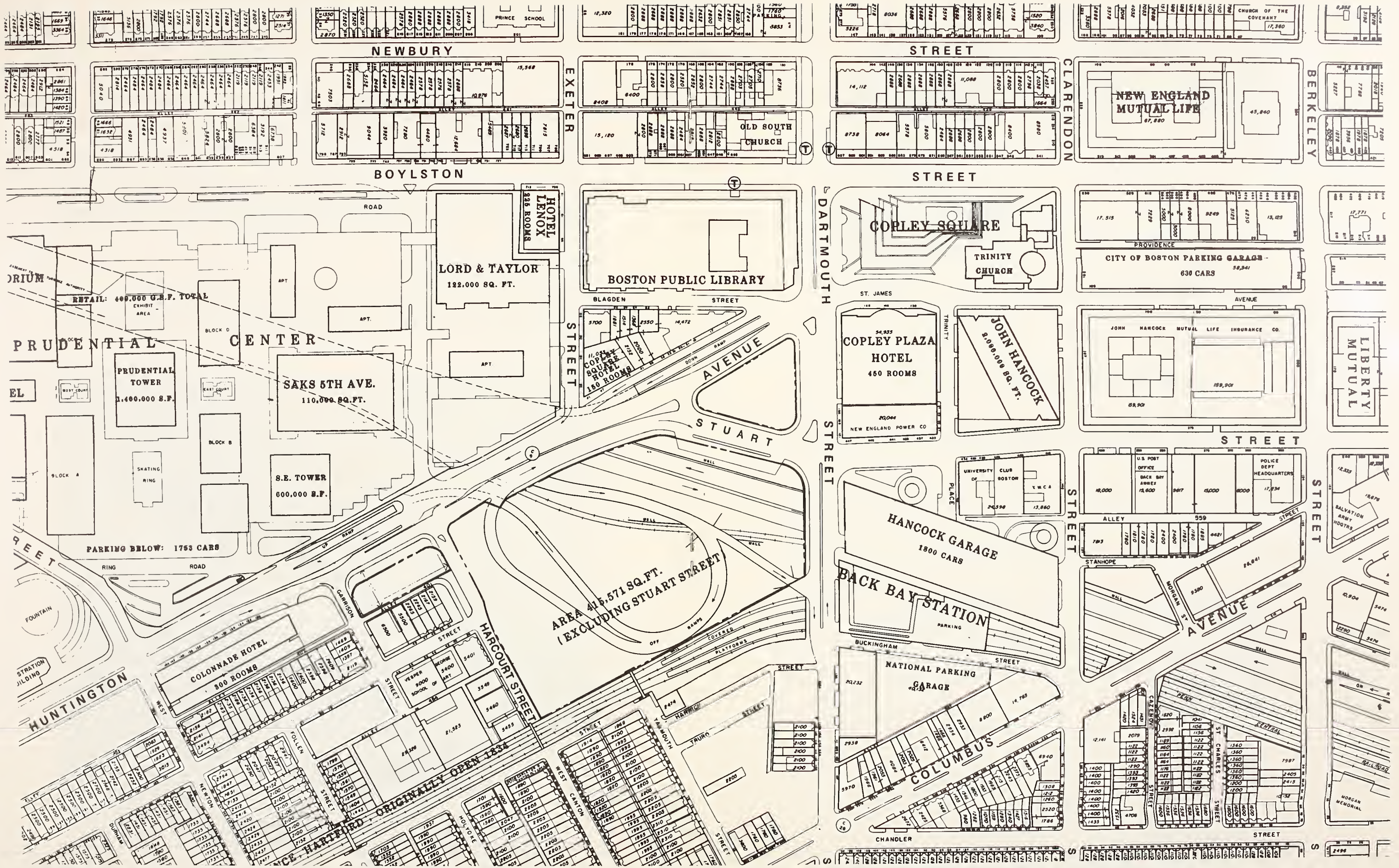
Construction on the Southwest Corridor project will begin in the summer of 1977 on the stretch from the South Cove Tunnel to Berkeley Street. The balance of the line is under engineering study, with construction to begin at a later date for completion in 1985.

During this eight-year period there will be rerouting of present services, with substitute bus services for some of the lines. Ultimately, in the mid '80s, Back Bay should have dramatically superior transit, suburban rail, and intercity railroad services.

New Directions For Traffic

In connection with Park Plaza, BRA is carrying out studies for potential changes in uptown-downtown traffic. Boylston, Arlington, and Stuart are some of the streets that may be affected. Several options are under review. BBA is monitoring this process. A decision should be made in June.







III

BOYLSTON AND NEWBURY STREETS

In recent years these two streets, the principal commercial thoroughfares of Back Bay, have been plagued by two problems. First, the high turnover of retail stores and restaurants. Second, the weakness in the office market.

Despite these problems, the retail streets have stood up quite well. Compare them with Washington and Tremont Streets and you will quickly see how well the Back Bay has done.

One reason for this success has been the parade of new businesses — many of very high quality — into this area. Here is a representative list of businesses arriving in the last twelve months.

Antartex Sheepskin Shop
 Wenniger Gallery
 Cuio
 George Lewis Gallery
 Romano's Bakery
 Vinicio Paoli
 Eddy's
 Thomas Segal Gallery
 The Tannery
 The Crazy Fox
 Klaire Taut
 Basics
 *Edward Harvey Luggage

Newbury Travel
 The Golden Door
 Sans Regret
 Il Grito
 Elle
 Panache
 Davio's
 The Gammon Shop
 Ehrlich's
 Spex
 The Front Porch
 *Cummings
 *Kenco Optics

*Earring Tree

*In Prudential Center

Policing

BBA's new crime committee under the direction of Jim Cannon has maintained close surveillance over security problems in the area. All reports indicate that the last twelve months have shown a definite improvement over prior periods. Close cooperation between BBA and Deputy Superintendent Rachalski of the Boston Police Department is getting results.

The most dramatic accomplishment by the police this year was the removal of hookers from the streets. In the summer and fall of 1976, the westerly blocks of Newbury Street and Boylston were overrun by aggressive hookers and they were generating very serious nuisances. But, as a result of police action commenced in November, the streets have been free from prostitution and related crime and nuisances. This is a remarkable achievement.

Porno Battles

For years BBA has campaigned to eliminate Pru Cinema, the only porno operation west of Arlington Street.

Last July Pru Cinema was joined by another porno enterprise, the bizarre "Freedom of Expression Church" which opened above Pru Cinema and which offered its parishioners beer and XX rated skin flicks.

BBA complained and, in record breaking time, the authorities had closed the church.

Then, in September Pru Cinema itself was closed.

Bars/Restaurants

Over the years BBA has promoted stringent zoning and hard public policies to deal with the avalanche of bars and cheap restaurants aimed into Back Bay. Hardly a week goes by without another application for a bar or low quality restaurant.

During the last twelve months BBA, aided by NABB, was almost completely successful in protecting the area from further establishments of these types.

Street Cleaning

DPW continues to make progress here. Boylston Street has been beautifully maintained, except for a few blocks where the fast food industry has not yet cleaned up its act. The alleys, however, continue to be disreputable, and this will be the subject of more action in the months ahead.

Street Lighting

For a decade the Federation has worked with city agencies on a master street lighting plan for Back Bay. Within the framework of that plan, BBA has campaigned vigorously for a new pedestrian lighting system for Newbury Street. Construction began in the spring of 1977. The new lighting system will be complete from Exeter Street to Mass Avenue later in the year. The second installment, from Arlington Street to Exeter Street is tentatively scheduled for early 1978.

The design of these lights has been controversial. However, people who like this design and others who do not will all agree that additional light makes life easier and safer for both residents and businessmen on Newbury Street.

Exeter Theater

Restoration and recycling of the Exeter Theater complex continues. In mid 1977 the top floor will be occupied by a medical computer service. The construction of an elaborate ground floor restaurant with greenhouse extension pushes ahead, with an opening planned for this summer.

Exeter Towers

On Exeter Street, from Newbury to Boylston, developer Bob Bowditch plans a major development complex. The hurdles to building in Boston have become higher in recent years, nonetheless, Bowditch is optimistic that he can make a construction start this year.

On the Newbury Street side opposite the Exeter Theater, Bowditch plans a six-story building, with retailing on the ground floor and luxury apartments above. On the Boylston Street frontage he plans a building of 155 feet in height, with retailing on the ground floor and luxury apartments above. Parking would be below ground for both buildings. The whole site would be excavated from Boylston to Newbury Street for the garage.

Copley Square

BBA has made several suggestions for the humanizing of the Copley Square Plaza.

Two have been adopted. A new lawn has been planted on the Boylston Street edge, and cars are now effectively excluded from the Square. Our next goal: an attractive outdoor cafe in the Square.

IV

RESIDENTIAL BACK BAY

Conversion by Nemetz

The reconversion of college properties to housing is a major and very beneficial trend in residential Back Bay these years.

In 1975 developer Zena Nemetz launched an effort to acquire buildings of Chamberlayne Junior College for reconversion. It turned out to be a difficult struggle to obtain the approvals of public agencies and, also, to negotiate a final arrangement with Chamberlayne, its creditors, and the bankruptcy court. Ultimately, she acquired nine Chamberlayne buildings.

Developer Nemetz had the support of the Federation in her acquisition and development program. No doubt, as she herself pointed out, she could not have succeeded otherwise.

She began conversion work in mid February 1977. Two of the buildings, at 199 and 238 Marlborough Street, should be converted and ready for occupancy this September. Six other buildings, at 274-282 Commonwealth, and 298 Commonwealth, should be ready a month later. The final building, 148 Commonwealth Avenue, will be put into production subsequently.

The end product will be eighty new apartments of good quality, ranging in size from studios to three bedrooms and ranging in rents from \$270 to something over \$700 per month. This work was all conventionally financed.

Garland — Simmons Conversions

In June 1976, Garland College ceased to function. Its property was then transferred to Simmons College.

Simmons elected to retain seven of the Garland buildings on Commonwealth, close to Charlesgate East, for the operation of a Middle Management school. The other twelve were then sold for reconversion to housing.

The Garland buildings taken as a whole are outstanding in their architecture and condition. Garland and Simmons both worked very cooperatively with the Federation and NABB in an effort to put these buildings into good housing condition and ownership.

Flicks

NABB, supported by the Federation, has battled hard and long to protect the residential area from the encroachment of honky tonk influences. One of the worst problems in recent years developed with the explosive growth and change of Flicks at the Somerset on Commonwealth Avenue.

Beginning in late 1975, the community groups were engaged in a long acrimonious battle to restrain the nuisances generated by Flicks and ultimately closed this enterprise. Flicks no longer functions and the neighborhood is much quieter these days.

Lighting

The Public Works Department has continued its lighting program for residential Back Bay. The fixture on Marlborough Street is the nineteenth century gas light. The fixture designated for Commonwealth Avenue is the elegant Algonquin type lamp.

Housing Inspections

Under the Community Development Block Grant program, funds have been made available for a new inspection program of Back Bay housing in order to identify and eliminate violations, dangers, and nuisances and to upgrade the quality of housing within the district. The inspection program is now under way.

Commonwealth Avenue Mall

Another CDBG Grant has been made for improvement of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall. The \$50,000 grant will be used for catchup maintenance, reseeding of the grass, spraying, pruning and fertilizing the historic elms.



V

PARK SQUARE

During the seven-year debate over Park Square, the area has disintegrated in a tragic fashion due to the uncertainty of its future. Legitimate businesses have moved out, buildings have become vacant, porno has moved in, and the problems continue to mount.

Last year BBA and its allies won a victory in forcing the shutdown of a strip club, the Mega Lounge. But two other strip clubs remain and BBA continues its crusade.

The Women's Educational and Industrial Union has moved to a stunning new headquarters on Boylston Street, but along with many other Park Square owners, find themselves in a difficult position since they cannot dispose of their property on the private market pending urban renewal.

The decision by the Hilton Corporation to close the Statler Hilton threatened to plunge Park Square into gloom and further blight. Fortunately, Roger Saunders, immediate past president of BBA, came to the rescue. The Saunders family reopened the hotel as the Boston Park Plaza.

Another key building is the First Corps of Cadets Armory, which is currently vacant. The Federation is backing the Governor's proposal to convert this building to a State Archives and Historic Museum. Park Square needs a revival of the Armory, but much more important is an early resolution on the long tangled Park Plaza Urban Renewal Project.



VI

CULTURAL / PROMOTIONAL

All in all, Back Bay is probably the liveliest place in town — day and night, winter and summer. Here is some of the action from the past twelve months:

The Next Move

In February 1977, the Next Move, a very talented young theater company, opened its new theater in the Institute of Contemporary Art complex opposite Prudential Center. Nearby is the Berklee Performing Center, which opened last year and which has been doing very well ever since. The combination of the new theater, Berklee, and ICA makes a strong set of cultural facilities in that end of the Back Bay.

Where's Boston?

This smash show of the Bicentennial has been held over by popular request and continues to run daily at Prudential Center.

Also at Prudential Center

Promotional activities on a year round basis include big Christmas shows, arts and crafts events, and very active summer evenings when theater, ballet and musical concerts are presented.

Copley Square

Every summer through 1970, BBA has worked with the Office of Cultural Affairs and Summer-thing on a lively program of events for Copley Square.

The 1976 events included weekend children's festivals and jazz concerts, along with crafts shows and concerts and performances each week.

The program for 1977 may be limited because of funding cutbacks, but there will be Sunday evening jazz concerts, Tuesday evening folk dancing, and some other events in the Square.

Newbury Street League Promotions

In May 1976, the Newbury Street League staged a very successful street fair and then followed up with fashion shows last Fall and this Spring.

The League, which is allied with BBA and has overlapping memberships, consists largely of design-oriented firms on Newbury Street.

Promenade

The first Public Garden Promenade was a whopping success in 1975. The encore in May 1977 upheld the same standards.

One of the outstanding features of the 1977 Promenade was a tableau performance of Swan Lake by members of the Boston Ballet Company on a Swan Boat drifting along the lagoon. The entire Garden was filled with festive crowds, lovely music, and splashes of Victorian elegance.

Hancock Observatory

In October the Hancock's 60th Floor Observatory opened and the public discovered fabulous new views of Boston supported by electronic displays of the city's history and a simulated helicopter ride over old and new Boston.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

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